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## **International Security Programme Rapporteur Report**

# **The Demise of the Western European Union: Lessons for European Defence**

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## INTRODUCTION

After more than 60 years of existence, the Western European Union (WEU) will cease its last residual activities in June 2011, a decade after ceding all political and operational functions to the EU's European Security and Defence Policy.

What has led to the WEU's final abolition? And what does it mean for the future of European defence and security? What, if any, useful legacies did the WEU pass on for EU-centric European defence, and is there anything that the EU failed to learn from the WEU's experience? Will the end of the WEU lead to a clearer division of labour between the NATO and the EU, or rather to stagnation and marginalisation of the EU's defence and security role? The European Security and Defence Assembly, formerly serving WEU, will also stop its activities in June. What will be the impact of losing a parliamentary assembly that was separate from the EU, competent to discuss defence issues, and which opened its doors to countries like Turkey, Norway, Albania and Ukraine?

Precisely as the WEU's closure was being marked with a parliamentary ceremony, Chatham House's International Security Programme contributed to the debate with a roundtable event, which aimed at raising awareness on some of the issues and challenges related to the WEU's demise and assessing the lessons for European defence. The guest speakers, Professor Alyson Bailes, former Political Director of the WEU, and Graham Messervy-Whiting, former Head of the WEU's Planning Cell, were both personally engaged in the earlier WEU-EU transition and have completed a joint research project this spring on the final closure<sup>1</sup>. Other key current and previous stakeholders from international organisations, government, parliament and academia participated in the roundtable, including its Chair Lord Roper, who was the WEU Institute's Director in the early 1990's.

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<sup>1</sup> Alyson Bailes and Graham Messervy-Whiting, 'Death of an institution. The end for Western European Union, a future for European defence?', Egmont Paper n°46, May 2011. <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/paperegm/sum/ep46.html>

## **PROFESSOR ALYSON BAILES: 'WHY CAN WE AFFORD TO GET RID OF THE WEU? AND WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE EUROPEAN DEFENCE?'**

The event started with a presentation by Professor Alyson Bailes on the political and strategic aspects of the WEU. In particular, why is the WEU being closed down now, and what lessons can we draw for European defence?

WEU's history can be summarized in four main periods. First, the immediate post-war era: the organisation was created in 1954 with the Modified Brussels Treaty. After serving a very useful role of uniting European countries and mitigating the likelihood of the resurgence of a Nazi threat in Germany, the WEU 'went to sleep' until the mid-1980's. It then re-emerged as a European talking shop, useful to start building common European positions at a time of change and US/European tensions. In the early 1990's, the WEU entered its third phase, the 'operational' phase, marked by some success in adaptation to post-Cold War conditions: enlargement, missions, the Petersberg tasks, structures for armaments work, and partnerships with NATO and the EU. Finally, from December 1999, the WEU surrendered political and operational work to the EU (and its European Security and Defence Policy – now known as Common Security and Defence Policy). Its role and responsibilities on armaments were later transferred to the EU's European Defence Agency, while its Assembly retained its parliamentary functions until mid-2011.

Professor Bailes argued that 'European defence' has remained an oxymoron ever since the plan for an integrated Defence Community failed in 1953. In her view there has been neither real collective 'defence' (Europe has survived under US protection) nor real 'European' integration (even the EU still treats military affairs inter-governmentally). In sum, the mutual guarantees in WEU's Treaty kept alive the legal and ideological potential for European defence more than a working basis as such. When the Saint Malo Declaration was signed by Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac in late 1998, the search for more meaningful European defence thus started afresh.

Professor Bailes went on to suggest a first balance sheet for the WEU's performance throughout its history. On the positive side, the WEU has had a formative effect on policy-makers regarding European defence and security issues. It introduced the Petersberg tasks, set up missions on the ground, and prepared elements of doctrine and actions. Additionally, the European Security and Defence Assembly provided a framework that gathered a wide range of member and non-member countries, and WEU's inclusive approach

bridged the EU-NATO membership differences that have aggravated, notably, Greece/Turkey/Cyprus frictions elsewhere.

Yet ESDP has obviously done better in many ways. The EU has launched more than 20 missions on the ground, in such challenging areas as Bosnia-Herzegovina, and demonstrated greater political commitment and energy. The EU provides full-spectrum capacity including humanitarian, financial and diplomatic elements. Nonetheless the EU, via ESDP and now CSDP, has not delivered results that would match its potential.

To explain the final closure of WEU, Professor Bailes noted two rationales offered by member states: related to costs – in an era of austerity, many proved reluctant to continue funding the WEU's residual activities - and the Lisbon treaty. However, the Lisbon Treaty's mutual defence clause is in fact less ambitious than the WEU's and more dependent on NATO for execution. It still falls well short of a real 'European defence' but allows ESDP (CSDP) to continue in useful niche roles, plays to the EU's multiple strengths, and at least does no harm to international security. In the meantime, NATO has managed to gain a new lease on life via the Strategic Concept and remains the strongest tool for crises, but many challenges remain, as the US progressively disengages from its leadership role within the Alliance. Latest moves by France and Britain suggest they share this analysis and prefer to act as a bilateral core for adapting European capabilities.

Professor Bailes concluded her presentation by offering three different scenarios which could foster the resurgence of European defence. Firstly, Europe could require a stronger collective military posture to deal with new threats such as mass immigration, a European equivalent of Hurricane Katrina or new developments in terrorism (involving Weapons of Mass Destruction for instance). Secondly, post-2008 defence cuts could act as a driver for practical integration across Europe, similar to what France and the UK have put in place. The European Defence Agency could be a platform to facilitate this process. Third, if NATO breaks down, the EU might have to step up its own efforts, with perhaps France and the UK leading a European core within NATO (similar to the European Security and Defence Initiative, which preceded ESDP). But does Europe have to be a strong military power anyway? Professor Bailes argued that by looking soft and being nobody's enemy, the EU could remain useful in conflict management missions, while focusing efforts on its own territory and welfare. This could indeed be a survival strategy in an uncertain multipolar world.

## **GRAHAM MESSERVY-WHITING: 'THE OPERATIONAL AND MILITARY ELEMENTS OF THE WEU'S LEGACY'**

Graham Messervy-Whiting presented an assessment of the WEU's operational and military elements. In his opinion, the fundamental weakness of the WEU was that it was not perceived as fit to be trusted to take on serious operational and crisis management operations.

Nonetheless, the WEU provided some positive foundations as well. One of the most important missions that the WEU originally had was to set up a security and defence culture in Europe. With its inclusive and flexible membership, the WEU played a very important role in this regard. The European Security and Defence College is now helping spread such a culture outside of Brussels.

Inter-military relations were fundamental within the WEU, given the eminent role of NATO and the EU in the region. The transition period when the EU took over most responsibilities from the WEU was a crucial time. Although willing to build on the strengths of the WEU, the EU had to start from scratch. It was important not to be too open about borrowings from WEU because of the scepticism the WEU triggered in some quarters. In particular, relations with NATO had to start afresh as NATO had long considered the WEU as a rather troublesome junior partner. Therefore, it seemed wiser at the time for the EU to present ESDP as a new start.

Operational experience is another area in which the WEU has proved beneficial. Although modest, the MAPE police mission, launched in Albania in 1997, involved 60 police officers from 20 countries backed by another 40, and provided a test case for further ESDP policing endeavours in the Balkans. The WEU's logistical experience proved very important as well for these.

In terms of command, control and communications, the WEU had put in place an annual conference for all the nations involved in crisis management operations, which helped develop standing operating procedures for missions.

The WEU developed a catalogue or menu of forces available in each country. Gaps would be identified and reported to political authorities. The fact that the EU's Helsinki Headlines Goals catalogue was created by ESDP only a few months after its birth is a clear indication of the WEU's legacy.

Furthermore, the WEU's intelligence capacity (monitoring security situations in former Yugoslavia and some parts of Africa in particular) was not lost when the EU took over, as some senior personnel were transferred to the EU.

Finally the WEU did develop solid resources in crisis management exercising and training. Given the difficulties of this planning cycle, it was essential for the EU to be able to draw on the WEU's previous work to be able to start working on these elements as soon as possible.

In conclusion, the extent to which the EU drew on WEU's operational and military experience was quite considerable and enabled the EU to develop its security and defence duties in a very short space of time.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

During the discussion session, a number of issues related to the WEU and European defence more broadly were raised. It was initially argued that the UK, despite its obstructionist reputation, took the lead in many practical initiatives related to the WEU. However, one discussant saw the 1998 Saint Malo declaration as a serious strategic mistake on three different counts: (1) the illusion that Saint Malo would compensate for the UK's decision to remain outside of the Eurozone and the Schengen area; (2) the illusion that Saint Malo would lead more resources to be devoted to European defence across the continent; (3) the assumption that two 'pol-mil' institutions could co-exist.

While acknowledging the EU's limits and previous failures, another participant stressed the political attraction of the EU as a beneficial alternative to NATO in several regions. Additionally, the EU has drawn into operations some members who would not have intervened otherwise and provided them with very useful experience.

Given the limits of ESDP and later CSDP, France and the UK have opted for a more pragmatic and non-institutional bilateral path. Do the Franco-British treaties signed in November 2010 provide a model for the future of European defence? Participants suggested that the answer partly depends on how the actors will deal with the agreement. It could indeed be a useful basis for more pooling, harmonisation and standardization across Europe.

The Libyan crisis has proved that there is a crucial need for political and military leadership for crisis management interventions to be successful. Discussants argued that the EU should provide hard-headed, strategic thinking analysis and advance planning in peace building and crisis prevention, rather than trying to provide 'real beef' on the ground. As noted by one participant, there has never been any strong political will for a joint European defence effort. The WEU was after all created to keep Germany down rather than enhance cross-Europe cooperation on defence. On the other hand, some argue that although NATO has been engaged in a defence transformation process since the end of the Cold War, it has not been immensely successful either.

Some discussants also raised the issue of parliamentary scrutiny. The end of the ESDA's activities could be detrimental to democratic oversight of defence and security activities in Europe.

In conclusion, two ongoing trends were emphasised: First, the likelihood of US disengagement, which Europeans have expected – and for some, feared

– since the end of the Cold War. This has become much more urgent, especially after Osama Bin Laden's execution and with the progressive withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in the next 3-5 years. Perhaps more than ever, the US simply needs capability and commitment from Europe, almost regardless of the frameworks used to achieve these aims. Second, budgeting has become a very central issue in defence. The UK and Europe have been extremely good at denying its virtue, but defence cooperation has never been as logical as it is now and is likely to remain so in the next few years. Left in sole charge since WEU's burial, will the EU and NATO use this opportunity to foster intra- and inter-organisational cooperation? Only time will tell.